

THE
LIMITS
OF
HISTORY

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Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.

T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*

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A Dangerous Form of Knowledge

On its face, history looks like a very good thing. I mean history in the sense of knowledge of the past, not the past itself. Whether or not the past itself can be considered a good thing is a different matter altogether. But knowledge of the past? What could be wrong with that? Knowledge is surely worth having. The plain fact that history is knowledge is enough to draw our praise all by itself. But history is not just any kind of knowledge; it is knowledge of the best kind. It seems to hold no dangers and to entail no risks.

And what great benefits it yields! History expands our horizons beyond the narrow confines of the present. It furthers understanding across the great divides of time and space. It furnishes a point of view from which to comprehend both others and ourselves. It gives us a means of orientation. It shows us where we came from and helps us discern where we are going. It pleases us no end with its variety and teaches us by its example. History uncovers lies and exposes myths. It rehabilitates the slandered and honors the forgotten. Very good things, all of these.

The only bad thing, it would seem, is that our knowledge of the past remains so sadly incomplete. So many errors abound, so many lapses of our judgment bias our understanding; there are so many archives yet to be explored, so many truths untold, and so many people not accorded their fair place in history. No wonder that we spare no effort in the pursuit of a complete and well-documented history of everything.

All that is true. At least I believe it to be true. But it is only part of the truth. There is another side to history, not so often noted but very much in need of recognition. For history is not as innocent as it pretends to be. It sprang like Athena fully armed from the head of Zeus. It is a weapon that was invented on a battlefield, a dangerous form of knowledge that can do harm

to both its subjects and its practitioners. I do not mean the harm that history does by failing to live up to the standards of fairness, thoroughness, and accuracy that are supposed to govern the historical profession and, to some extent, the modern world. Everyone knows that mendacious histories can do harm beyond mere intellectual error. But that is history at its worst. The harm I have in mind is caused by history at its best.

In this chapter I shall focus on that harm. I shall first try to identify some elementary assumptions beneath the form of knowledge we call history. I will then turn to its origins in the disintegration of medieval principles of order during the early modern phase of European history and sketch its ascendancy. After making a few disclaimers and qualifications to put a brake on possible misunderstandings, I will try to define the problem that history confronts today. And I will explain why the remainder of this book deals with Hermann Conring, a subject so narrowly defined that readers have a right to know about its connection to the limits of history.

A Brief but Doubtful Lesson

In order to perceive how any harm could come from history at its best, we need to start at the beginning. Or at least as close to the beginning as possible. We need to put aside all of the usual ideas about what history is or ought to be and take a good close look instead at the one thing that underlies all forms of history. That one thing is the distinction between past and present. This is so elementary, so necessary for the very possibility of thinking about the past at all, that it may be considered the founding principle of history.¹

At first glance the distinction between past and present seems reasonable beyond dispute. Things obviously change. We have experience of that. Hence it seems natural to divide the world into things the way they used to be and things as they are now: past and present. This is clearly something more than just an arbitrary construct of the mind, something that we could change at will or even do without. If there were no difference between the present and the past, all things would be the same—not merely in the jocular sense of the French *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, but in actual reality. Nothing could happen. Everything would simply be the way it is. There would be nothing for historians to study.

None of this is quite as certain as it seems. But let us examine it more closely before we put it to the test. For the distinction between past and present has interesting implications. For one thing, it gives historians an object to examine. That object is, of course, the past: things that were then. But

the distinction between past and present does more than merely set aside a piece of reality for historical inspection. It also assigns specific characteristics to that piece of reality. Two, in particular: absence and immutability. These are perhaps the two most fundamental features of the past the way we tend to think of it. They seem to follow by definition and to apply without exception. Whatever else may be said about the past (and there is an infinite number of possibilities, on which historians never can agree), this much seems certain: all aspects of the past are gone, and none of them can be changed. Even if there were nothing else to unite historians (and chances are that there is not), historians would still at least remain united in this one respect: *they study things immutable and gone*.

This characterization of the object of historical investigation is of course abstract. But it is worth attention. Absence and immutability are crucial for the fascination the past exercises over the minds of those who think of it. They fill us with a sense of awe, and they confront us with the peculiar task that every living person must complete on occasion: the task of recovering something, somehow, from the silent depths of that immutable absence that is the past, so that it will not be gone forever but will remain alive in memories and images and, best of all, perhaps, scholarly knowledge. To confront that immutable absence without fear and wrest it from the darkness so that it may be exhibited to present and future generations for their appreciation and, if possible, instruction: that is the task of historians.

Since, however, no one can lay his hands on anything that is genuinely gone, the means by which historians complete their task follow with the same clarity from the distinction between past and present as do the object of history and the task of the historian. Those means consist of things existing in the present that carry traces of information about the past. Such objects may be called evidence (because they are visible present signs that testify to something in the invisible absent past), or sources (because information about the past is thought to flow from them as water flows from a spring), or primary literature (because they come first, as opposed to the secondary literature historians write based on sources), or data (because they are given, as opposed to the theories we build on them).

The difference between *evidence*, *sources*, *primary literature*, and *data* is mostly a matter of emphasis. I shall use these terms more or less interchangeably. But one thing is worth underscoring: sources need not be written. Anything—ruined buildings, sculptures, music, blooming flowers, mountain ranges, painted furniture, untied shoes, stacked cords of wood, smoothly polished stone—anything can serve as evidence so long as two conditions are fulfilled: it must be present, so that it can be examined, and it must carry

information about the past, so that it can function as a source. If writings are the sources most historians prefer, then it is only because they are easier to read than bones and stones and mountain ranges. Their function is the same.

One more thing: the distinction between past and present also furnishes historians with their most basic principle of method. That principle consists of one command: thou shalt place everything in the context of its time. This keeps historians from committing anachronism. It places the past under a great taboo in order to prevent a kind of chronological pollution. No one who violates that great taboo may claim to be a true historian. The past is sacred; the present is profane. Anachronism profanes the past by mixing past and present. That is the worst offense historians qua historians can commit. All other sins can be forgiven, but not this one. Anachronism is the sin against the holy spirit of history. Show that a historian has unwittingly infected the interpretation of the past with some particle of present, and you have shown the historian not only to have failed at the task, but to have failed shamefully.

The distinction between past and present thus undergirds history as a whole. It defines the object on which historians practice their art (gone and immutable), sets them their task (learn what you can about that thing that is immutable and gone), establishes the means by which to achieve the task (sources), and lays down the method they must follow (avoid anachronism). That is why it deserves to be called the founding principle of history.

But its significance goes further than just history. In the first place, as the distinction between past and present is constitutive of the past, so it is obviously constitutive of the present. The present, by virtue of the same distinction, is that which the past is not: it is right here and now (not gone) and it can change (not immutable). It need not be reconstructed in any way; it can be felt, and it even makes its presence felt, whether we like the experience or not. There are, it seems, no sources to which we need to turn in order to experience the present. The present *is* the source; we live in it. And as the present is experienced, it changes. Indeed, it changes with every passing second because it opens to the future. There seems to be no line dividing the present from the future like that dividing the present from the past. The past is past forever, gone from the world and never to return. But the future will not be future forever. It is not gone from the world at all. It may not yet be here but it will eventually arrive. Present and future lie on the same side of the great divide between the present and the past. They belong together like freedom and changeability. They are united in opposition to the past.

The changeability of the present has disadvantages: it makes for uncertainty. Hence people worry, especially when changes strike them with unpleasant force. Often they look for guidance as to what they should be

doing next. Sometimes (strangely enough) they find it in the very past whose distinction from the present is the reason they want guidance to begin with. But the changeability of the present has great advantages as well. It means that we who are presently alive are not compelled to repeat the past. Our forefathers' sins need not be visited on us. We can seek a future better than the present, and definitely better than the past. Freedom and progress depend on the distinction between past and present. The founding principle of history is therefore also a founding principle of politics.

A sovereign state is usually defined as one whose citizens are free to determine their own affairs without interference from any agency beyond its territorial borders. But freedom in space (and limits on its territorial extent) is merely one characteristic of sovereignty. Freedom in time (and limits on its temporal extent) is equally important and probably more fundamental.² Sovereignty and citizenship require freedom from the past at least as much as freedom from contemporary powers. No state could be sovereign if its inhabitants lacked the ability to change a course of action adopted by their forefathers in the past, or even one to which they once committed themselves. No citizen could be a full member of the community so long as she was tied to ancestral traditions with which the community might wish to break—the problem of Antigone in Sophocles' tragedy. Sovereignty and citizenship thus require not only borders in space, but also borders in time.

Borders in time are moments of foundation or conversion to mark the point where sovereignty and citizenship begin and the past leaves off. They guarantee presence to the state by setting it apart from the past. Without their assistance, the state would constantly have to look over its shoulder in order to fulfill archaic obligations. The state could not protect the freedom of its citizens or their progress into the future. Hence the simple structure of the oath that foreigners are asked to swear on the occasion of their naturalization as citizens of the United States of America (in this matter I happen to have personal experience): first they renounce “absolutely and entirely” all past obligations to foreign rulers, and then they declare “freely without any mental reservation” their willingness to defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies in the future.³

The place of history in the scheme of things thus is impossible to understand if we restrict its meaning solely to contemplation of the past. History is directly and systematically linked to citizenship, sovereignty, and the state. If history is the form in which we contemplate a past that is immutably divided from the present, then citizenship, sovereignty, and the state are the categories by which we declare our freedom to change the present into the form that we desire for the future. History and politics reinforce each other. They function as complementary elements of one overarching structure.

They are related to each other as the contemplation of something immutable and gone is related to action here and now on something changeable and present.

One can extend this line of thinking even further, because the world includes more things than those that are immutably gone and mutably present. Some things are simply immutable: exempt from time, and hence from the distinction between past and present, but not gone. Numbers and rules of logic, for example, are such things. Numbers and rules of logic are neither past nor present, and future least of all, but always and everywhere the same. Two is two, here and there and everywhere, unchanging, now and forever. “Yes” is “yes” and “no” is “no” in all corners of the universe at any time.

Others might add laws of nature (for the universe of physics) and natural laws (for the universe of morals) as further instances of things that are eternally the same. Of course such laws are notoriously difficult to establish. But even in a book of history it may be pointed out that they can be imagined and that, like numbers and rules of logic, they stand in a definite relationship to history and politics. That relationship is one of difference: unlike history and politics, laws of nature (physical) and natural laws (moral) do not obey the distinction between past and present. If history and politics complement each other within the realm of time, physics and morality do so beyond the realm of time; or so, at least, they claim. They occupy a realm where history and politics have (or are at least supposed to have) no sway. Nature endures forever.

That history keeps doing battle with science (each science, all sciences, natural, moral, political, and social) is therefore neither an accident nor a deplorable oversight soon to be corrected by an improved variety of history. Nor can it be accounted for by the distinction between particulars and general laws, much less the distinction between science and art.⁴ It reflects a division of the labor of society according to the parts of time, a distinction so obvious and fundamental that its significance is easily overlooked. Historians clear a space in time so that it may be occupied by individuals no longer tied to custom and tradition. They shelter the present from the past by tending to records in libraries and archives safely removed from places where they might interfere with laws of nature, conscience, and the state. History is nonscience, nonmorality, and nonlaw. Among all modern forms of knowledge, it is the counterdiscipline par excellence. It operates behind the scenes of science and philosophy and seems exempt from the critique of reason. Its function is essential for the well-being of a modern world (any modern world). Its modern occupants could not imagine life if their present were

cluttered by the laws of ancient Rome, the science of Aristotle, and the morals of Saint Augustine.

Thus the distinction between past and present leads us straight back to the conception of a morally autonomous human being taking control of his own fate by making politics and society conform to principles of nature. That human being depends for his reality on the distinction between past and present no less than history does. He differs from the past as subjects differ from objects of agency and knowledge, as reason differs from custom, and as responsible adults differ from the children they once were. Morally autonomous human beings are held accountable; children are not. Unlike people who lived in the past, the morally autonomous human being is present and alive. He may know about the past by acts of interpretation that bring the evidence to life, but he is himself impossible to know because he does all of the knowing. He is subject to laws of nature and natural laws but never to the past. He knows the past only as something with which he may part company at any time, and politics as a world by which he is bound only to the degree that he consents. He is responsible not to the past but to himself, obliged to follow no tradition, enjoying sovereignty over his own affairs.

The subject so conceived is neither a fact of nature nor a clear and distinct idea, much less a product of tradition or politics. He is a product of the same fundamental act by which the past is distinguished from the present and time from eternity. He is a correlate of the objectivity that history obtains from evidence. This individual subject, with his presence, his autonomy, his freedom from all laws except laws of conscience, laws of nature, and positive laws sanctioned by the unconstrained expression of his own free will, with his ability to transcend all circumstantial limitations and to escape from time itself in order to claim a ticket of direct admission (as it were) to eternal life—this subject is the cause that history serves.

It is scarcely an accident that *subject* is a word we use with equal facility for the subjects of a sovereign ruler (in the realm of politics), the subjects of scientific investigation (in the realm of nature), and the mind behind all thought and action—the subject behind Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum*.⁵ This coincidence of different meanings in one word is a sign that the subject—the self that distinguishes itself from the rest of the world and is the source of all distinctions—resides at the center of what we call the modern world. Nor is it an accident that the *subjectivity* (in the sense of uncertainty of judgment) that we attribute to history and politics stands in definite tension with the apparent stability of nature, conscience, and the state. It is an indication that history performs a special role in linking freedom to subjectivity.

History thus forms part of a coherent framework of principles and assumptions about the world and the things of which the world consists. This framework helps to organize the thought and action of modern subjects into a whole whose integrity is threatened not by the Devil whom medieval Christians feared, but by that demon of fallibility whom Descartes is justly famous for having elevated to a place of honor. This framework assigns a definite place to nature and culture, past and present, mind and matter, and grants supreme authority to conscience, sovereignty, and nature. History may be relative. But the trinity of conscience, sovereignty, and nature is absolute. Each of its three persons is fully present. And each is singular. No man or woman can have two natures, two sovereigns, or two consciences—unless they happen to be mad, disloyal, or divine.

Only one point remains in order to complete this lesson. It is that the distinction between past and present is doubtful in the extreme. No one that I have heard of has ever found a line between the present and the past. And a moment's reflection shows that none is likely ever to be found. Where could that line be drawn? A second ago? A millisecond? Last year? The birth of Christ? The creation of the universe? These are examples of some points in time where one could try to draw the line. All of them have something to recommend themselves. But only for some people and only for some time. None can claim to represent *the* line dividing the present from the past. If the present could really be divided from the past at all, it would have to be divided by as many lines as there are present moments: not one line between one present and one past, but an infinity of lines between an infinity of presents and an infinity of pasts, one for each incremental movement into the future.

This simple truth casts fundamental doubt on everything said to this point. Assume that the past is really dead and gone. How could it be recalled? By means of sources? But if the past were gone, we could not even recognize the sources as dealing with the past. If we know anything about the past at all, it is only because we have some knowledge that there exists some past of which the sources speak to us before we even start to examine them. Without such prior knowledge, the sources would speak a language as full of meaning as the wind.

Assume that the past is really immutable. How could the present change? How could one part of time keep passing if the other part stood still? Change in the present must surely change the past in ways that we may very well not understand only because we never stop to ponder them. At least the past keeps changing in extent, because the sum of all things past grows in extent with the addition of every passing second. Whether that changes only the

sum total of the past (as two changes into three when one is added) but does not change the elements of which it is composed (because two can still emerge unchanged from three when one is subtracted once again) may deserve more serious consideration than we have given it. Perhaps I am mistaken, but I know of no law of nature that makes the past immutable. Nor does science seem qualified to formulate such laws. Science requires observation and experiment. But if the past is really gone, it lies beyond observation and experiment. The very reason we regard the past as immutable (its absence) makes that immutability impossible to verify. If, however, the past is present here and now in some yet-to-be-determined sense, available for observation and experiment, there seems to be no reason to assume that it can never change. In either case the immutability of the past can hardly be considered more than speculation.

And what about the requirement to place everything in the context of its time? Which context would that be? Did things get lost on cross-temporal excursions? Do they confuse the tenses? Do they require our help to find their place of origin? How could we help them if they did? There is no universal office of chronology where things that have been lost and found in time could be turned in for temporal safekeeping. There are no lines distinguishing the context of one piece of evidence from that of others with any more reliability than the reliability of the line between past and present itself. History does not fall into discrete contextual packages, each properly aligned next to the others so as to cover the entire past (without any messy overlapping, without embarrassing lacunae) and stop obediently at the line between yesterday and today. Contexts do not arrive in sizes conveniently tailored to suit the purposes of historians who wish to write the history of, say, a person's life, a country, a revolution, or an idea.⁶

The number of contexts into which things have to be placed is either infinite or one. Infinite because you might as well admit that every action ever taken, every sentence written, every word spoken, every particle of meaning, and every event at any moment in the history of the universe has its own proper context into which it would have to be placed in order to avoid anachronism. Contexts are just as infinitely divisible as reality itself—which helps us understand why the historical literature multiplies with a speed that stands in an instructive contrast to the presumed immutability of the past. Or else context is singular, numerically one, a context into which nothing needs to be placed because everything is placed in it already. In that case all contexts blend with one another straight across the boundary between the present and the past. Each subject is connected to all others in ways so fluid as to make every contextual boundary a matter (more or less)

of arbitrary choice. Only the faith that some real boundary exists between the present and the past lends plausibility to the belief that historians can actually place things past into the context of “their” time and place.

The Other Side of History

Should we conclude that history is nothing but a useless waste of time? Not in the least! We rather need to recognize that knowledge of the past is merely the fruit of history, not to be confused with the tree on which it grows. The tree is the action by which the present is divided from the past. For the distinction between past and present does not exist apart from our activity. We place that distinction into the uninterrupted flow of time. We assert ourselves and thereby we transform the world. We claim a place for ourselves in the here-and-now and hold it in opposition to the there-and-then. We draw a fence around a part of reality, call that the past, and mine it for the knowledge in which historians specialize. That is the founding act of history. The tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, whose operation in the historical imagination of the nineteenth century Hayden White described so cogently a quarter century ago, prefigure the field of history.⁷ But they prefigure only what kind of history historians will write. They presuppose that there is a field. That field first needs to be created.⁸

We must therefore revise what we said about history before. We said that history was founded on the distinction between past and present. Quite so. But we failed to add that this is not a distinction given, but a distinction made. Reality may be impossible to know. (In order to avoid skeptical misinterpretations, I hasten to add that this is different from saying that reality does not exist. The opposite is closer to the truth: reality does exist, which is why it is difficult to know. The hardboiled egg is not particularly difficult to eat. But what it is? No one can tell.) But history is not the study of reality, much less the study of the reality of time. History is the study of evidence . . . and evidence is not reality. Evidence is a sign, as different from reality as letters are from meaning and as numerals are from numbers. It is not there by accident. It carries on its back the difference between the signifier and the signified and points beyond itself to something else from whence it came: the past. That is how it gives us the means to draw a line through time where none may in reality exist.

Evidence seems merely to serve historians as the source from which they draw knowledge about the past. But its function as a source is secondary. Its main function is to divide the present from the past. The absence of the

signified is what historians seek to comprehend. But absence can never be experienced as such. Absence can only be discovered in the gap between the signifier and the signified. That absence is what writing marks, as a letter marks the distance that must be overcome for meaning to be communicated from one person to another. Writing results in evidence par excellence: a record carrying information about something that happened at some other place and in some other time. It lends conviction to our image of the past as dead and gone.

Historians therefore only appear to privilege written sources because they furnish more information about the past than other kinds of evidence. In truth they privilege written sources because writing is the most fundamental means so far devised by human beings to divide a live reality (embracing both past and present) into one thing that is completely dead and gone (the past) and one that lives only here and now (the present). But it is not the past that is gone; only the records are. Or more precisely, that which has been recorded in the records seems to be gone from them. Writing leads us to confuse the record with the reality, to mistake the exchange of information for understanding, and to misconstrue mere distance in space and time as an abyss—as if there could be communication if reader were not joined to writer by something above and beyond the writing. Nor is the past immutable; only the records are. Or more precisely (since records can be forged and changed beyond all recognition), only the information that was recorded in the evidence is immutable. Reality and its meaning may be in eternal flux. But letters, once written, just like words once spoken, may seem to have a significance that will remain the same until the end of time.⁹

Seen in this light, all aspects of the historical endeavor take on a different meaning. History only appears to be a form of knowledge about the past. In truth history serves to confirm a line between now and then that is not given in reality. The complementary relationship between history, politics, and nature that we evoked above goes deeper than mere agreement on dividing respective spheres of influence. History is constitutive of modern politics, constitutive of the kind of modern state that claims sovereignty for itself and the autonomy of individuals subject to nothing except their conscience and the laws of the physical universe. The prohibition on anachronism? It merely seems to be a principle of method by which historians secure the adequacy of their interpretation. In truth the prohibition on anachronism defines the purpose for which the discipline of history exists: to divide the reality of time into past and present. History enlists the desire for knowledge about the past to meet a deeper need: the need for power and independence, the need to have done with the past and to be rid of things that cannot be forgotten.

Whatever knowledge it may pick up along the way is but a means toward that end.

Once this is understood, the seemingly insoluble methodological quandaries in which history involves its practitioners can be seen for what they are: not reasons to change course, but quite the opposite, a salutary spur to keep on marching, a necessary source of the unflagging energy with which historians pursue their unacknowledged goal: dividing the present from the past forever. Here is the reason that the obvious, repeated, and inevitable failure of historians to reach their publicly stated goal (a fair, complete, and true understanding of the past) amounts to no valid argument against the utility of history at all. Historians never treat knowledge of the past simply as knowledge, no matter how good it is. They treat it as a point of departure for further expeditions. Only slackers take good books as an excuse to rest. Historians worth their salt leave them behind the very instant they are published and resume the long march to history's final destination. Historians may never cease to criticize the fruits of their own labor, to toil for the subjection of ever new areas of temporal reality to the distinction between past and present, and thereby to emancipate humanity from time.

Have previous historians fallen into anachronism? Of course they have, as all historians must. Is that a reason to turn back? Quite the opposite, it is a reason to go on. It is a signal that the line between past and present has been breached. Alarms are sounded and historians rush to the defense in order to prevent the past from making its presence felt again. Have past generations of historians ignored the history of private life, of women, children, animals, and dreams? Let us extend the range of subjects to which historians may lay claim! Have previous historians focused only on written sources? They have been insufficiently ambitious! We need to turn attention to unwritten sources, too, and place them in the same distance modeled effectively by written ones. That will be harder. But anything can with sufficient effort be pressed into service to history.

In short, there are two different sides to history. So long as history is viewed as theory of the past, the distinction between past and present looks like a fact; the past, like an object to be studied; the study of the past, like the proper task of the historian; the evidence, like the source from which historians obtain their knowledge; and the prohibition on anachronism, like the basic point of method that keeps the knowledge pure. But things look different just as soon as it is recognized that history is also a form of action. From that perspective the distinction between past and present looks like an act of self-determination by which the sovereign subject assumes her rightful place in time; the knowledge historians draw from evidence, like the

means by which historians make the past lie still; and the prohibition of anachronism, like marching orders for a mission to make the world safe for autonomy.

There is a whole series of conceptual pairs on which one could rely to make the difference between the two sides of history intelligible. Just now I used the distinction between theory and practice. I could as well have called it the difference between the objective and the subjective sides of history. In its objective capacity, history represents whatever knowledge may in fact be drawn from the examination of the sources; in its subjective capacity, history underwrites the freedom of the self that is engaged in the examination. I could have used the distinction between public and private, too. In public, history consists of the pursuit of knowledge. In private, it consists of competition among historians who seek to displace rival interpretations of the past with one of their own original design.

Or take the distinction between locutionary content and illocutionary act that has in recent years been brought so fruitfully to bear upon the study of the past, and to which I shall have reason to refer on several occasions.¹⁰ One side of history consists of things historians say about the past (locutionary content); the other side consists of what they do in saying them (illocutionary act). The former is the object to which historians draw attention; the latter is what makes them historians. Considered in terms of its locutionary form, history may well be indistinguishable from fiction. Considered in terms of illocutionary acts, however, the difference is profound. Literature transports readers elsewhere in space and time; history places them firmly here and now. Literature can take its readers away only because it claims not to deal with real persons and events, however unfounded such a claim may actually be (seeing how often fiction is thinly disguised history); history binds them to their location because it claims the opposite, regardless that this claim, too, may be entirely unfounded (seeing how often history turns out to be poorly substantiated fiction). Whoever feels uplifted by reading history does so because learning about what happened in the past is tantamount to realizing that "I am here and now." Whether the reader then goes on to criticize the past from a progressive point of view or to identify with it from a conservative position is a subordinate and secondary question. In either case history gives the reader the satisfaction of temporal self-affirmation.

Each of these pairs—the list could be extended—has something to recommend itself. But all of them agree on one central point: that there exists a difference within history itself, a difference that constitutes at one and the same time a boundary and a bond. The subjective and the objective, the

theoretical and the practical, the locutionary and the illocutionary sides of history presuppose a whole. However differently they may be construed, they reinforce each other in such a way that neither could exist without its opposite. They stand in a dialectical relation.

The past, therefore, is not just to be found in sources preserved in libraries and archives, laboriously deciphered by specialists. It lives and breathes without assistance in every corner of the world, right here and now. It joins the present in one temporal order that is present but not "present," given, but not only here and now, because it contains the present together with the past. Nor does the present simply age and fade away into the past with uniformity. The ticking of the clock measures neither the speed nor the intensity with which the present shades into the past. Christ is much younger than the Grand Inquisitor, and Stalin older than Karl Marx. The past, if it is anything at all, is a dimension of the present and changes along with it. I know this is a startling thought: the past not immutable? But it may be startling only because the fascination with immutability (with death) lulls us into a trance.

Historians who limit their account of the past to things that can be stated on the basis of a complete examination of surviving records deserve every last bit of the praise that long-standing custom bestows on them for their pursuit of objectivity (if only to the necessarily limited extent that they have managed to achieve their aims). Let that be writ in stone. But the pursuit of objectivity is only half the point. Historians who miss the other half mistake the meaning of their work. They exclude the unrecordable from recognition and cut the past in two: one documented, known, and dead; the other undocumented, unknown, and undead. History then concerns itself only with the past abroad and scorns the past at home—the home from where historians take off, leaving behind what they need most for history to flourish: knowledge of self.

The Historical Revolt

These thoughts will seem unnecessary to some readers; to some they will seem worse. But they are needed to understand the condition of history today. History was not always the province of professionals. Nor was it always the traditional form of knowledge it has become. History jumped on the scene of European mental life with the force of a revolution against a specific form of governance. If it involved new knowledge about the past, it did so not simply out of intellectual curiosity, but because a definite attitude toward the past was integral to the rule of the two chief surviving representatives of

so-called medieval universalism, the Roman emperor and the Roman pope (a third, the eastern Roman emperor, having conveniently been eliminated by Turks unwittingly assisting the historical revolt).¹¹

These rulers claimed not only universality in space. They also claimed universality in time. Both emperor and pope insisted that they were in communion with eternity, and both sought to embody the past as though it had endured over the centuries without change. They founded their authority on a deliberate anachronism that only a modern point of view can construe as an error in historical methodology. The empire and the papacy knew the distance in time between themselves and antiquity. But they judged it with a different measure from the one historians use. To charge them with failure to understand the course of historical events, as though they were schoolboys who had not listened to their master, is misleading. They were themselves the masters. If they did not appreciate history as modern people do, and never did succeed in building modern states, it was at least in part because that was not their ambition. Anachronism was built into the foundation of their government, a source of their authority, a means enabling them to draw legitimacy from texts that dated from antiquity and bore the traces of an alien civilization.

This was the world that was turned upside down in the historical revolt. The chief protagonists of the revolt were humanists, so-called because they claimed to revive what they called *studia humanitatis* and what still underlies the disciplines we call humanities: classical grammar, poetry, rhetoric, history, and moral philosophy.¹² Humanists placed history at the service of European princes and republics seeking to emancipate themselves in fierce campaigns from the authority of pope and emperor. And though they did not succeed in removing pope or emperor completely from the stage, they did force both to change their mode of operation. In the process they ruined the foundations on which the medieval universe had rested, and they built new ones for the inhabitants of modern, territorial, sovereign states.

Humanists, of course, were not alone. No doubt the historical revolt could never have prevailed without the help of soldiers and standing armies fighting real battles with real weapons.¹³ At least as indispensable were tax collectors, lawyers, bureaucrats, accountants administering state finances, and men of state conducting modern diplomacy.¹⁴ There were Protestants and scientists who worked toward a transformation of the early modern world following paths that sometimes coincided with those traveled by humanists and sometimes diverged from them, paths that led sometimes into rebellion and sometimes only toward gradual change.¹⁵ A good case can even be made that scholastic philosophers and theologians traveling along what

they themselves already called the modern way (*via moderna*) deserve more credit for breaking the old mold than any other intellectual movement at the time.¹⁶

Humanists, in other words, were only one of many groups of people engaged in the historical revolt, and history was only one of the weapons in their armory. Rhetoric was more conspicuous (or shall we say more audible?) and classical philology more elementary. But humanists were indispensable to the articulation and dissemination of the new set of principles for carving the world into manageable pieces that I touched on above. And history, though not their only weapon, went deeper than any other in cutting the mind of Europe loose from its universal moorings. The Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution could not have happened without the efforts of humanists. Humanists oiled the machines put into motion by modern princes and republics—not to mention that they themselves served often as bureaucrats, diplomats, and soldiers.¹⁷ They played a crucial role in handing methods of drill and self-discipline to modern armies.¹⁸ In short, humanists represent more clearly what was entailed in the historical revolt than any other single group, if only because their way of thinking entered all of them.

The most enduring symbol of the victory that humanists won over medieval universalism is the success with which they imposed a new periodization on history. Until early modern times, Europeans had used many different ways of reckoning with the past. The one according to which the world had been ruled by four world monarchies—Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman—was merely one of the most familiar. But all Christian accounts agreed on this: the most important turning point had been the advent of Christ. Hence Christian accounts agreed as well (as they still do) on reckoning time in years since the birth of Christ. That the birth of Christ coincided (more or less) with Emperor Augustus's foundation of the Roman empire, the last of the four world monarchies, merely reinforced the perception that the beginning of the Christian era had unique significance.

According to that view, the people we now call medieval were not living in the Middle Ages, much less in an age of cultural or intellectual decline, whatever their assessment of the debt they were so deeply aware of owing to Christian and Roman antiquity. They were living in the most advanced age of the world. They were in the forefront of history, face to face with the end of time. Only one other turning point was left in the remaining stretch of time, and that was the return of Christ to judge the living and the dead. There was much difference of opinion about the ways in which the world would end. There were disputes about the temporal location of the millennium and the rule of Antichrist. But none of those disputes shook the

belief in the unity, singularity, and finality of the period of world history that began with the birth of Christ. Whatever happenings the future could possibly have held in store paled to insignificance compared to the two events defining the period over which pope and emperor claimed to rule: the birth of Christ and the end of time.

This was the view the humanists destroyed.¹⁹ They never managed (because they never tried) to abolish one of the two points in time to which medieval universalism owed its temporal unity: the advent of Christ retained significance for the periodization of world history. And it has done so ever since. Though there are now (as there were then) many alternatives to reckoning time from the birth of Christ, and though attempts are sometimes made to loosen the connection between our form of dating and its roots in a particular religion by substituting the abbreviations C.E. (common era) or B.C.E. (before the common era) for A.D. (*anno Domini*, in the year of the Lord) and B.C. (before Christ), the number of years accompanied by those abbreviations still points to the birth of Christ with a clarity that can be embarrassing in gatherings whose judgment on the significance of Christ is not unanimous.

But humanists did succeed (because they tried) in destroying belief in the temporal unity of the period since the birth of Christ. They were certain that the Holy Roman Empire had undergone a change that was not really for the better and in any case was so deep that the unity of the period from antiquity to the present had to be considered a mirage. Some of them even thought the Roman empire was altogether dead and gone.²⁰ They abandoned the doctrine of the four world monarchies, and they invented the concept of the Dark or Middle Ages in order to capture the long period of decline by which they believed their own time to be divided from the glories of antiquity.²¹ In all of these regards they were assisted by reformers, Protestant as well as Catholic, who performed a parallel operation on the body of the universal church by replacing the search for endurance and continuity with that for the recovery of origins. Once they succeeded in destroying the unity of the period, it did not take long before expectations of the end of the world gave way to an unbounded future extending without limits to all eternity.²² Thus humanists and reformers joined forces to dislodge the ruling heads of medieval universalism from their preeminence over the final stage of history and relegated them to a barbaric interval between a resplendent classical antiquity and a renascent modern age. That was a blow from which the authority of pope and emperor was never to recover.

The division of history into ancient, medieval, and modern (and the division of the historical profession into corresponding branches) is not simply better than the theory of the four world monarchies. Nor is it merely

different. It rather is abiding testimony to the victory that the party of the historical revolt won over its opponents in a great civil war that shook early modern Europe to its foundations. By exploding the temporal unity of the period from ancient times to the present, the humanists changed truths that had enjoyed apparently unshakable permanence into mere antiquities. They transformed things that seemed self-evidently true into things of the past that were henceforth impossible to know without a special effort. They demoted the universal power of pope and emperor from present experience to an aspect of history that had to be judged by means of evidence. Exploiting the potential inherent in altering temporal perspectives was their greatest accomplishment. And the unthinking facility with which historians have until recently applied the tripartite division of history into ancient, medieval, and modern, not merely to the history of Europe or to their own profession, but to the history of the entire world, merely confirms the one-sided nature of the victory.

History thus arrived on the scene with an energy quite different from that which it commands today. This energy was not confined to history in the narrow sense. The affirmation of the self that was integral to the rise of history extended across the entire realm of thought and action. It took shape in new forms of science (heliocentric astronomy, inertial motion, experiments), new forms of law (positive, natural, and moral), new forms of religion (salvation by faith alone, priesthood of all believers, treatment of works and ceremonies as indifferent), and the development of three-dimensional perspective in painting.²³ As the adoption of the three-dimensional perspective turned medieval painting from an attempt to reflect eternity into an antiquated style, so the adoption of the temporal perspective in studying texts transformed medieval scholarship from an attempt to access sources of eternal authority into a poor sort of history. As three-dimensional perspective transformed visual images from symbols of transcendence into representations of physical objects in natural space, so history transformed writings from means of communicating eternal truths into records of the particular thoughts and actions of some particular person at some particular time and place. New forms of painting established definite links between visual images and particular things, so that the images could be said to represent the things. New forms of reading established definite links between writings and persons, so that the writings could be said to serve as evidence for the intentions of their authors. As three-dimensional perspective subjected visual reality to domination by the particular point in space from where it was inspected by the observer (shifting the locus of visual authority from objects perceived to the observer perceiving them), so temporal perspective

subjected temporal reality to domination by the particular point in time from which it was inspected by the historian (shifting the locus of authority from things enduring over time to the examiner of the past). Both stood for new forms of freedom and responsibility. Both imposed standards of objectivity on different (visual and temporal) aspects of reality.

At that time the dialectical relationship between the two sides of history was filled with greater tension than it ever was thereafter. Greater, too, therefore, was the creative energy with which historians asserted new forms of consciousness against the claims of universal authorities. Objective knowledge of the past was at a minimum, a plan of action not yet undertaken, a distant dream, the contents of an unwritten book. A new perspective had been adopted. But nothing had been seen clearly yet. Compared with the knowledge we command today, contemporary knowledge of what had happened during antiquity and the Middle Ages was raw and scarce. Objectivity may be the last quality to be attributed to early modern historians. Few things can be more striking than the freedom with which they sent a motley gang of facts into battles over the meaning of the past that the most thoroughly annotated histories today would scarcely dare to witness from afar.

Assertions of individual autonomy were similarly scarce. On some occasions they may have been made with a clarity too startling to have lapsed into oblivion. One thinks of Luther defying the emperor in Worms, Sir Thomas More beheaded at the command of Henry VIII, and Giordano Bruno burned alive in Rome. But if such acts of self-assertion proved unforgettable, it was only because they flew so flagrantly in the face of the ordinary course of things. They were a promise and a dream of things to come, no more. Meanwhile the world continued to follow well-trodden paths of custom and tradition. Inertia rules society as much as it rules physics. Nothing is easier than to identify the many ways in which early modern people thought and behaved just like their predecessors. It would take centuries before the notions of individual autonomy and personal responsibility that underlay the humanist reconceptualization of time were turned into the common property of millions of citizens in modern nation states, most of them taught to read and write at public expense, none of them willing to have their freedom limited by anyone's mere custom, and all of them regularly called upon to do their civic duties and exercise their civic rights.

Nonetheless, history gained its hold over the European mind as the result of a revolution. Historical perspective permitted humanists to offer an interpretation of authorities like the Bible and Roman law that was not merely new or better but of a different kind: interpretation with reference to time that viewed a text as the result of human agency, distinguished one time

from another, and made that difference the principle of its approach. They changed the order of the world. Equipped with objectivity, they relegated medieval universalism so firmly to the past that one can barely speak of it today without provoking suspicions of heresy, treason, or irrelevance. They put the faith in evidence so firmly into place that things unrecorded and unrecordable seem to have lost all chance of gaining recognition. They won what has to count as one of the more one-sided victories in the long line of humanity's attempts to remake the world in its own image.

An Elementary Confusion

Yet this was never how they saw themselves. From their own point of view, they started no rebellion. They were on the defense. They were restoring ancient truths. If they took the initiative, they did it only because their enemies' ignorance, corruption, and tyrannical abuse of power left them no other choice. They were compelled to act by knowledge, faith, and truth. They brought about rebirths and reformations, renaissances of antiquity and returns to the true spirit of the original church. They served Christ and the classics. Self-assertion was not on their list of things to do.

An elementary confusion thus led to a victory whose winners remained oblivious, unconscious even, of the true novelty of their own enterprise. The progress that they really made was confused in their own minds with mere improvements to an existing pattern for which they needed no justification. It seemed simply true. It seemed to justify itself. It had been known before. It merely needed to be stated once again in all its pristine purity. As Columbus confused the new lands he found across the ocean with the old lands that he had set out to search for, so the historians confused the new world they opened up to human examination with the old world they studied. The novelty of the historical perspective was submerged beneath a generic claim on truth—as if there were no difference between reading texts and treating them as evidence, between remembering the past and dividing it from the present.

They had, of course, good intellectual reasons not to regard themselves as revolutionaries. The scrutiny of ancient texts as such was scarcely new. Humanists and reformers expanded the number and kinds of documents to which attention had to be paid, improved on older interpretations, and cast their ideas in different literary genres. But new texts had been discovered and translated throughout the Middle Ages, and some of them were far more dangerous to papal and imperial authority than, say, the letters of Cicero or

Tacitus's *Germania*, which humanists added to the list of books worth reading later on. In that respect the work of humanists was thoroughly continuous with that of their forebears. Pope and emperor themselves drew their legitimacy from the Bible, the writings of the fathers, and Roman law, all of them ancient texts. And medieval scholars had developed the study of ancient texts in glosses, commentaries, questions, sums, and other genres to heights of technical and stylistic perfection that only modern prejudice can fail to reward with the unstinting admiration they deserve.

The philosophy of Aristotle, to mention only the most obvious example, was pagan to the core. It posed a manifest threat to Catholic belief in God's creation of the world out of nothing and the personal immortality of the soul. It is not without reason that Aristotle's writings on metaphysics and natural philosophy were officially prohibited early in the thirteenth century. They could hardly have been integrated into the teaching of medieval schools without an effort that well-nigh consumed the intellectual ability of Saint Thomas Aquinas and his Dominican companions. Even after Aquinas the bond between ancient, pagan, Greek philosophy and modern, Christian, European theology was never more than tenuous. And yet Aristotle's metaphysics was so successfully incorporated into medieval thought that he came to be known as "the philosopher" (*philosophus*), with an authority analogous to that of Saint Paul, known as "the apostle" (*apostolus*), without any mention of his name. Compared to that amazing act of interpretive assimilation, the work of humanists could justifiably be seen as just another step on the long road from ignorance to knowledge.

A charitable view may therefore attribute this elementary confusion to mere lack of intellectual acuity and the old human habit of falling victim to the seductive clarity of writing. There may have simply been no way to recognize that progress came from a new frame of mind and new conceptions of the good.²⁴ More likely, however, confusion over the nature of the historical revolt must be attributed to a fear of the authorities so powerful that it could not be openly acknowledged. The protagonists of the historical revolt were only too well aware that the authorities would accuse them of overturning the established order. But if they could convince themselves that, far from breaking with the past, they were reviving it, that they were doing nothing but telling the truth, except to tell it better, then they were safe. And so they did. Maintaining that their interpretation of the texts was merely a better understanding of the same ancient sources on which the authorities themselves relied (only more of them, and in more authentic form), they were oblivious to the charge of heresy. The continuity with ancient

truths in which they saw themselves confirmed them in the good conscience that they were right.

Only a few managed to raise their deepest fears to consciousness. Such was, I think, the case with Machiavelli, Luther, and Hobbes. All three cut through the confusions of their age to a point where the willfulness and even violence beneath the truthful exterior of the historical revolt became all too apparent. All three were willing to take responsibility for that violence by seeking to redefine the good in terms self-consciously transcending the limits of all writing. *Virtù*, faith, and absolute sovereignty are different in many ways. But none of these are written, and all of them agree in their lack of respect for law. All three had a characteristically ambiguous relationship to humanism. And in the end all three fell victim to the taboo that they had challenged. In squarely owning up to the violence inherent in the historical revolt, facing the fear of death, and forcefully demanding a degree of responsibility exceeding the capacity of contemporaries who could not imagine truth as anything but given, they merely managed to turn opinion against themselves and strengthened the taboo. Theirs are precisely the ideas that were most speedily removed from sight by authorities and revolutionaries unanimous in their conviction that order needed to be drawn from writing.

That is perhaps the reason why Machiavelli, Luther, and Hobbes have withstood the test of time more successfully than their contemporaries. Their views remain more thoroughly alive. The business they started was never finished. The threat they posed in early modern times has never been defused. It lurks barely concealed beneath the surface of modern consciousness, from where it exercises an abiding fascination. They still provoke intense hostility. With friends like these, who needed enemies? But notwithstanding their intellectual longevity and their importance as both challengers and victims of the boundaries laid down in the historical revolt, in the short term of early modern European and even modern history, all three must be considered failures. The most successful were saner and arguably more boring men like Calvin, Melancthon, Lipsius, and even John Locke, who followed the radicals up to a point but closed the door on their most daring experiments. They defused the explosives that Machiavelli, Luther, and Hobbes had placed under all principles of order, transformed them into classics, and made their teaching safe to study in public and in school.

That gave them a decisive edge. Unconsciousness of their own place in time released the revolutionaries from self-doubt. It served them like a magic shield, made them invulnerable to attack, and allowed them to walk like innocents across the intellectual battlefields of early modern Europe, if not un-

touched by the fray, at least completely confident of being in the right and therefore victorious in the end. Their enemies found it impossible to grasp the source from which the historical revolt drew strength. They tried. Tried very hard. They knew that they were being threatened with sedition, that knowledge of history corroded the foundations of their authority. They did not in the least believe that the good conscience of their adversaries was justified, and they were more than willing to brand them as heretics. Indeed, if heresy can be defined as the willful rejection of statements whose truth has been sanctioned by public authority, then the historical revolt was nothing if not heretical in nature.²⁵ But they were never able to convict the revolutionaries of anything more incriminating than respect for the same texts on which they founded themselves. They failed to identify the heresy. Their charges never found their object and therefore failed to stick. They were as blinded by the light of history as the protagonists of the revolt.²⁶

Fear of authority thus contaminated history with a subliminal degree of dishonesty that has never been altogether shed. A revolutionary transformation slipped unnoticed into the modern age under the cover of ancient or objective knowledge for which no one needed to take responsibility—indeed, could not have taken responsibility without endangering the revolution. As sovereignty was declared to be absolute and subject neither to history nor positive law nor, above all, to any papal or imperial powers, but only to a natural law defined by a new science, so history was declared to be absolute, independent of time, and subject solely to the objective faculties of the historian. As Jean Bodin once put it with chilling candor, “it is a kind of legal absurdity to say that it is in the power of the prince to act dishonestly.”²⁷ In the same way, history made it a kind of scholarly absurdity to say it might be in the power of evidence to misrepresent the past.

The revolution remained anonymous. It was as if it had happened by itself, as if it was nothing but truth and nature coming into their own. We still have no name for it other than the exquisitely misleading names of *Renaissance* and *Reformation* that it was given in early modern times, or the meaningless name of *early modern history* given it since by historians. We still have no better name for the enemy whose rule it destroyed than *medieval universalism*—a cipher that conceals what was at stake. We still restrict the designation *revolution* to later events in England, America, France, and elsewhere, whose main achievement was not to overturn the existing order of society but merely to bring the existing order of society into conformity with principles that had long since proven their worth. The historical revolt was never called by its proper name.

The Shadow of the Emperor

But time has little patience with the devices by which we hope to extricate ourselves from change. Time is a layered manifold, composed of an infinity of things related to each other in a structure of endless subtlety in which each thing is both past and present in degrees and proportions of infinite variability. Unlike the evidence, the past straddles the boundary between subject and object, transcending and embracing both. It has a subjective side, not frozen anywhere in time like ice, but fluid like water; not fixed like a recording, but live like a performance. It slips through the meshes of whatever nets of evidence historians may be trailing. The plodding distinction between a medieval past and a modern present was always a violent imposition on the reality of time. It was an imposition that worked, because it in fact allowed the humanists to shape a new form of human life. But like all things in time, it worked only for a while.

The second phase of history's rise to eminence therefore turned out to be quite different from the first. When the Holy Roman Emperor finally stepped down from his throne and the papacy agreed to a concordat with Napoleon that turned French clerics into salaried employees of a secular state, the energy that history had brought to bear on the creation of sovereignty was finally freed from the authority of the past. The boundary the humanists had drawn between their own age and the Dark Ages ceased to be an object of contention dividing those who actively supported medieval forms of government from those opposing them in the name of modern forms of subjectivity. Henceforth the advance of sovereignty proceeded on auto-pilot, as it were, unchecked by mental reservations or significant opposition. The rulers of medieval space and time were gone. History became objective in a novel sense.

Now it began to make good sense to ask whether the Middle Ages ended in 1517 (when Luther posted his theses), in 1492 (when Columbus "discovered" America), or in 1494 (when the Italian wars began), as if the boundary a revolution had once placed into time was simply an event that happened. History no longer needed to stand for a special form of thought and action; rather, it seemed to be able to extend its understanding dispassionately to all forms of consciousness. The empire, the history of Roman law, and Gothic cathedrals acquired their historians. Historical societies were founded, sources were published in new editions, historical novels were written, scholarly journals proliferated at unprecedented speed, and historians transformed themselves from public intellectuals attempting to reshape

the order of the commonwealth into professionals conducting the business of history according to the standards of professional organizations.

The fate of history in the nineteenth century thus stands in an instructive contrast to its beginnings in early modern times. Like early modern humanists, nineteenth-century historians witnessed an explosive accumulation of new evidence. Like early modern humanists, they insisted on the significance of taking a historical point of view. But if the main endeavor of early modern humanists had been to set themselves apart from the preceding age in the name of recovering a distant antiquity, the main endeavor of nineteenth-century historians was to reverse that very break in the name of a historical understanding transcending all boundaries of space and time. The transformation of the Middle Ages from a tale of human ignorance into an object of intense and admiring historical examination was a surprise. For the first time, the Middle Ages moved to center stage. That reversal shows exactly what was at stake in the demand for the new level of objectivity in the examination of the past of which Ranke's famous "wie es eigentlich gewesen" still serves as the abiding motto.

As a result the meaning of the historical revolt was first attenuated and then lost. History was no longer recognized as the tool that a particular party had deployed in order to advance its cause. History was thought to be no tool at all but an impartial form of understanding, capable of encompassing all forms of humanity without distortion. History seemed no longer humanist but human. The difference was overlooked. The business of history was changed from the creation and defense of a new order of the good to its perpetuation in an unending process of self-critical revisions, of which the turn to the Middle Ages was merely the first in a long line that has not ended yet.

From that point forward, historical self-consciousness was forced to pay a growing price for the lack of self-knowledge that first led it to victory. Historical revolutionaries enjoyed good conscience so long as they were able to confront real enemies. Now that those enemies were gone, their good conscience lost its foundation. The charge of heresy was effectively brushed aside so long as it was brought by popes and emperors. But it gained most uncomfortable strength when it was brought by critics left and right with unimpeachable credentials in the service of progress who saw only too clearly that history lacked the innocence it claimed. History lost the ability to speak in any other mode than irony or cynicism.²⁸ And by a strange inversion, history began to embody the very authority it had so valiantly sought to overturn.

Just when the emperor seemed to have been displaced into the past

forever, transformed into an impotent and insubstantial figure, a shadow of his former self, forced to retreat into a legendary mountain, that mountain turned out to be history itself. Inside that mountain the emperor survived, and from that mountain he returned, not as his former self, but as a new state of mind, the shadow cast by modernity, the insubstantial alter ego of individual autonomy, branding each of its turns with silent charges of heresy and never leaving its dark side. Under this shadow, the subjects of modernity went on to conquer empires of unprecedented magnitude, perhaps in fits of absentmindedness but not without the guilty conscience that was the price for claiming moral and scientific objectivity, and ultimately at the cost of unspeakable human sacrifice to history and nature. The shadow of the emperor brought civil war into the modern world. It turned conscience into the enemy of sovereignty and history into the enemy of nature. It inspired Napoleon to teach the world how to transform liberty, equality, and fraternity into reasons for imperial expansion. It menaced facts of politics and nature with the curse of irrational and inhumane brutality. It looms over Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Nietzsche; over politicians struggling to protect the common good from unconditional suspicions of partiality; over scientists indicted for the unintended consequences of their knowledge; and not least over historians waging a ceaseless exorcism to protect the present from the living dead.

This was the time when the monstrosities peculiar to the modern age—from Dr. Frankenstein, Count Dracula, and the man without a shadow to Dr. Moreau, Dr. Jekyll, and Mr. Hyde—gained their first hold over the European imagination and put a check on the enlightened optimism that that imagination had thought to be its final destiny. Surprised by those monsters, incapable of grasping the cause of an unease that sprang from the same unconscious source that had for so long guaranteed success, the modern state and the modern discipline of history began to display the symptoms of an affliction whose full extent would not become revealed until some time thereafter and has not yet been understood. Romanticism, imperialism, and the violence by which the twentieth century was consumed are the price that Europe paid, and has made others pay, for overturning medieval universalism on the cheap.

There is therefore a kind of displaced or stateless past, somewhere beyond the borders of the empire of history, just as there are displaced and stateless people who suffer, in addition to the aches and pains of ordinary human life, the peculiar horror of an existence unacknowledged by the authorities, for no better reason than that they happen to have come without official papers. The mere existence of that past threatens historical self-consciousness with

dissolution. It does not respect the boundary between subject and object, between the record and the thing recorded. It serves as a perpetual reminder of the original act of violence by which history cut time into past and present in order to subject a share of reality to its control. Invisible to eyes trained on the evidence, it haunts the present like a ghost called forth by a historical sorcerer's apprentice and grows in strength with every effort to subject it to the dominance of history. Like a monster created by history out of the living body of time, the stateless past roams the present in search of acceptance and recognition. Like the living dead, it does not know itself (because its knowledge has been taken from it by historians), and it rises from the grave to which historians thought it could safely be consigned and takes revenge by turning on subjectivity itself in order to annihilate the boundary to which it owes its shadowy existence.

Disclaimers and Qualifications

At this point I would like to insert a few disclaimers. First, I do not mean to argue that history was invented in early modern Europe. History has a venerable pedigree that reaches back at least to Greek antiquity and, by an only slightly more liberal definition, to wherever and whenever people have tried to record the past in any way, which is to say, much further back in time than ancient Greece, to records altogether different from alphabetic writing and to places all over the globe. Neither do I mean that history first acquired its revolutionary side in early modern Europe. Even a cursory listing of works considered to be classics in a tradition with which the accident of having been born in a particular place and time have made me familiar suggests a deeper connection between history and revolution than could conceivably be limited to modern times.

Herodotus and the Persian Wars; Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War; Polybius and Rome's conquest of the Mediterranean; Livy and the destruction of the Roman republic; Tacitus and the foundation of the Roman empire; Saint Augustine and the conversion of the Roman empire to Christianity; Otto of Freising and the assertion of papal supremacy; the city chronicles of medieval Italy and the demise of the Staufen emperors: examples such as these may well lead unprejudiced observers to conclude that the study of history is bound to violent upheavals by more than sheer coincidence. Seen in this light, the efflorescence of history in the modern West is only one instance in support of the hypothesis that there exists some subterranean connection between great contributions to history, imperial expansion, revolt, and civil war. But I note that only in passing. What I mean

of a critical edition, and sometimes the variants affect the meaning of the text (not to mention the accuracy of the translation). The only way to forestall confusion about the evidence on which this book draws is therefore to reproduce it in the notes.

INTRODUCTION

1. Heidegger, "Wissenschaft und Besinnung" (1954), 60.

CHAPTER ONE

1. A quick glance at the definitions of the term *history* offered by a standard dictionary of the English language will confirm that the distinction between past and present may well be the only point uniting meanings notoriously numerous and difficult to disentangle. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, for example, defines history as

1: a narrative of events connected with a real or imaginary object, person, or career . . . **2a:** a systematic written account comprising a chronological record of events (as affecting a city, state, nation, institution, science, or art) and usu. including a philosophical explanation of the cause and origin of such events—usu. distinguished from *annals* and *chronicle* **b:** a treatise presenting systematically related natural phenomena (as of geography, animals, or plants) . . . **c:** an account of a sick person's family and personal background, his past health, and present illness **3:** a branch of knowledge that records and explains past events as steps in the sequence of human activities: the study of the character and significance of events—usu. used with a qualifying adjective <medieval history> <European history> **4** . . . **a(1) obs:** a pictorial representation of an historical subject (2) or **history painting:** painting esp. popular in the 17th and 18th centuries in which a complex of figures conveys a story or message usu. based on history or legend **b(1) obs:** **DRAMA 1 (2):** a drama based on historical events **5a:** the events that form the subject matter of a history: a series of events clustering about some center of interest (as a nation, a department of culture, a natural epoch or evolution, a living being or a species) upon the character and significance of which these events cast light **b:** the character and significance of such a center of interest—compare **LIFE HISTORY c broadly:** past events <that's all history now>; *esp:* those events involving or concerned with mankind **d:** previous treatment, handling, or experience (as of a metal).

Only the kind of natural history identified in 2b may possibly not require the distinction between past and present.

2. A point well made by Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility* (1972). It was sanctioned by the well-known legal tag *par in parem non habet imperium* (equals have no power over each other), which relieved sovereigns from any obligation to abide by the will of their equally sovereign predecessors. The same argument was crucial to the understanding of sovereignty first developed by Jean Bodin in his *Six livres de la république* (1576).

3. "I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or

which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law;* that I will perform non-combatant service in the armed forces of the United States when required by the law;* that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion: so help me God." Quoted from Seckler-Hudson, *Federal Textbook on Citizenship* (1978), 13-14. This is the book I was encouraged to study in order to prepare myself for joining the citizenry of the United States of America. According to an accompanying note concerning the clauses marked with asterisks, "the Immigration and Nationality Act permits, under certain circumstances, the taking of the oath without these clauses."

4. For other views see Windelband, *Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft* (1894); Rickert, *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* (1902), in English *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science* (1986); Rickert, *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft* (1926); Hempel, "Function of General Laws in History" (1942); and Hughes, *History as Art and as Science* (1964).

5. See the main definitions of the noun *subject* recorded, for example, by the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 5th ed.: "1. Person subject to political rule, any member of a State except the Sovereign, any member of a subject State . . . 2. (log., gram.). That member of a proposition about which something is predicated, the noun or noun-equivalent with which the verb of a sentence is made to agree in number etc. . . . 3. (philos.). Thinking & feeling entity, the mind, the ego, the conscious self, as opp. all that is external to the mind . . . 4. Theme of discussion or description or representation, matter (to be) treated of or dealt with . . . 5. Circumstance that gives occasion for specified feeling or action . . . 6. Person of specified usu. undesirable bodily or mental tendencies . . ." *Webster's* definitions are more extensive, but they follow similar lines.

6. That explains the slightly embarrassed honesty with which *Webster's* definition 5a of history as "the events that form the subject matter of a history" describes these events as "clustering about some center of interest." This is decidedly vague. But it is also refreshing; defining the subject matter of history in terms of "some center of interest" is surely far closer to the actual state of affairs than defining it in terms of contexts.

7. White, *Metahistory* (1975).

8. For three equally profound but very different investigations into the nature of time along lines of thought that can here only be alluded to, see Bergson, *Essai* (1889), in English *Time and Free Will* (1910); Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927), in English *Being and Time* (1966); and Nabokov, *Ada* (1969).

9. For a study of the distinction between information and communication (especially as derived from writing), its development over the whole span of human history, and the extent to which it helps to clarify our periodization of that history, see Hobart and Schiffman, *Information Ages* (1998).

10. The distinction was classically deployed by J. L. Austin in the William James lectures of 1955, *How to Do Things with Words*, and has since then spawned a considerable body of philosophical literature. In the present context, it is most usefully approached through Tully, *Meaning and Context* (1988).

11. The term *historical revolt* is borrowed from Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (1967), 17; cf. Preston, "Was There an Historical Revolution?" (1977). The literature on the subject is vast, but it is itself chiefly historical in nature and therefore not

always as illuminating as one could wish; see Weiss, *Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity* (1988); Cochrane, *Historians and Historiography* (1981); Franklin, *Jean Bodin and the Sixteenth-Century Revolution* (1963); Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship* (1970); Huppert, *Idea of Perfect History* (1970); Ranum, *Artisans of Glory* (1980); Schiffman, *On the Threshold of Modernity* (1991); Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought* (1967); Pocock, *Ancient Constitution* (1987); Levine, *Humanism and History* (1987); Kelley and Sacks, *Historical Imagination in Early Modern Britain* (1997); Joachimsen, *Geschichtsauffassung und Geschichtsschreibung in Deutschland* (1910); Seifert, *Cognitio Historica* (1976); Hassinger, *Empirisch-rationaler Historismus* (1978); Muhlack, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Humanismus und in der Aufklärung* (1991). For a general survey, see Breisach, *Historiography* (1994). For classic statements, much cited and disputed, see Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1989), in English *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1990); Dilthey, *Weltanschauung und Analyse des Menschen* (1914); Fueter, *Geschichte der neueren Historiographie* (1911); and Meinecke, *Entstehung des Historismus* (1936), in English *Historism* (1972). For a sense of the range of conceptual approaches, compare Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (1939), in English *Civilizing Process* (1994); Löwith, *Meaning in History* (1949); Klempt, *Die Säkularisierung der universalhistorischen Auffassung* (1960); Toulmin and Goodfield, *Discovery of Time* (1965); Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (1973-76), in English *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1983); Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft* (1979), in English *Futures Past* (1985); and Hoelscher, *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft* (1999).

12. This according to the definition of Kristeller, "Humanist Movement" (1979). For more about humanism, see the concise essay by Witt, "Humanist Movement" (1995); the comprehensive survey by Rabil, *Renaissance Humanism* (1988); and Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients* (2000).

13. Hale, *War and Society* (1986); Parker, *Military Revolution* (1988).

14. Bonney, *Economic Systems* (1995); Stolleis, *Pecunia Nervus Rerum* (1983); Hoffmann and Norberg, *Fiscal Crises* (1994); Schnur, *Die Rolle der Juristen* (1986); Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (1955).

15. The relationship between humanism, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution is a subject of such abiding interest that it is touched upon in virtually all treatments of any of these subjects. See Moeller, "German Humanists" (1972); Trinkaus and Oberman, *Pursuit of Holiness* (1974); Tracy, "Humanism and the Reformation" (1982); Spitz, "Humanism and the Protestant Reformation" (1988); Long, "Humanism and Science" (1988); Grafton, *Defenders of the Text* (1991); and Kaufmann, *Mastery of Nature* (1993).

16. Courtenay, "Nominalism and Late Medieval Religion" (1974); Oberman, "*Via Antiqua* and *Via Moderna*" (1987); Oakley, *Politics and Eternity* (1999).

17. Grafton, "Humanism and Political Theory" (1991); Martines, *Power and Imagination* (1979).

18. Oestreich, *Geist und Gestalt des frühmodernen Staates* (1969), in English *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State* (1982); Worstbrock, *Krieg und Frieden* (1986).

19. For a solid scholarly treatment of the invention of the Middle Ages, see Neddermeyer, *Mittelalter in der deutschen Historiographie* (1988).

20. For exemplary statements of this view, see Erasmus's letter to Dukes Frederick and George of Saxony, 5 June 1517; and Luther, *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation* (1888), 462.

21. Mommsen, "Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages'" (1959).

22. For a concise exploration of the significance of this shift, see Koselleck, "Vergangene Zukunft der frühen Neuzeit" (1979), in English "Modernity and the Planes of History" (1985).

23. See the trenchant remarks by Feyerabend, "Progress in Philosophy" (1987). Cf. the classics by Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (1968); and Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970).

24. For language about the conception of the good, in distinction from knowledge and in opposition to "naturalist reductions," I rely on Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (1989).

25. "A heretic, by canonical definition, was one whose views were 'chosen by human perception, contrary to holy scripture, publicly avowed and obstinately defended.'" Moore, *Formation of a Persecuting Society* (1987), 68, with reference to Gratian's *Decretum* II Causa 24, quaestio 3, canons 27-31 (1879), 997-98.

26. One may well doubt that the state of affairs is much clearer today. There is a good body of literature on what has come to be known as the "voluntarist" tradition in late medieval and early modern philosophy. But its relationship to the origins of historical thinking remains deeply obscure. One of the best approaches to the issue is offered by the writings of Francis Oakley, especially "Christian Theology and the Newtonian Science" (1961), *Omnipotence, Covenant, and Order* (1984), "Absolute and Ordained Power of God in Theology" (1998), and "Absolute and Ordained Power of God and King" (1998), now reprinted in Oakley, *Politics and Eternity* (1999). For some further observations on the place of heresy in the historical revolt, see Fasolt, "Sovereignty and Heresy" (1998).

27. Bodin, *On Sovereignty* (1992), 39, from bk. 1, chap. 8, of the *Six livres de la république*; p. 156 in the French edition of the *Six livres de la république* of 1583.

28. See White, *Metahistory* (1975).

29. See Schiffman, "Renaissance Historicism Reconsidered" (1985).

30. Burke, *Vico* (1985); Berlin, *Vico and Herder* (1976).

31. Or, even more strikingly, the moment when it became possible to use history as a source of doubts about the very modernity that had brought history into existence; see Lilla, *Vico* (1993).

32. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (1983); Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1991).

33. Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* (1978).

34. I am thinking of Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (1953); Voegelin, *New Science of Politics* (1952); and Schmitt, *Politische Theologie* (1934), in English *Political Theology* (1985). None of these can be considered friends of historical consciousness. Yet for the most part, their critique only strengthens the position they attack, in spite of themselves, and never more clearly so than when the only alternative they offer consists of some kind of return to some ideal that was once realized but has been lost.

35. Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (1989), 41-42.

36. Rabil, *Renaissance Humanism* (1988), illustrates the varieties of humanism well.

37. Baron, *Crisis of the Italian Renaissance* (1966). Cf. Seigel, "'Civic Humanism' or Ciceronian Rhetoric?" (1966); Grafton, "Humanism and Political Theory" (1991); Neddermeyer, "Humanism and Empire" (1993); Hankins, "Baron Thesis" (1995); and Witt et al., "Hans Baron's Renaissance Humanism" (1996).

38. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought* (1961). Cf. Logan, "Substance and Form" (1977); and Nauert, "Renaissance Humanism" (1980).

39. Cf. White, *Content of the Form* (1987).

40. See the second thoughts of Nauert, "Humanism as Method" (1998).